

Public Debate on Gender-Fair Language in Poland

Every language with gender distinction in grammar has been dealing with the issue of equal treatment of men and women in past decades. The English language has been a pioneer here, with discussions on this topic going back to the mid-twentieth century. The Polish language is on the opposite side of the timeline. The discussion started late, and no serious actions have been formally done so far to achieve a gender-fair language. Even among the linguists, a rather a *laissez faire* attitude has dominated for a long time, and a tendency to justify the use of 'generic' masculine. Linguists speaking about 'sexism', or even just a dominance of masculine forms in the language, have often been dismissed as feminist activists (cf. e.g. Karwatowska 2005 and Łaziński 2006). However, whether we agree or not, the fact is that the modern societies have been changing towards more inclusiveness, even if it meant more effort. And although Poland has never been a champion of progress in this respect, there have definitely been some changes in the linguistic behavior and attitudes with respect to gender equality (e.g. Satoła-Staśkowiak 2018).

This is clearly visible, for instance, in inquiries submitted and answered in the popular online 'language counseling site' *Poradnia Językowa PWN* associated with a respected publisher of Polish dictionaries PWN (<https://sjp.pwn.pl/poradnia>). Questions related to gender equality issues have been increasingly popular there and they reflect the overall mixture of attitudes between the dismay at the use of particular feminine forms, and a search for confirmation that those same feminine forms may be used. Significantly, a vast majority of those inquiries indicates uncertainty, how to properly form and use a feminine noun (e.g. of a profession that has traditionally been dominated by men), reflecting an ongoing issue in the Polish society – a lack of proper education about a gender-inclusive language and a lack of wide (and constructive) public discussion about proper or acceptable gender-inclusive and gender-neutral expressions.

What is more, the results of the survey of *Poradnia* reflect the character of the increasing public discussion about the gender-fair language in Poland. It has originated through grass roots initiatives, and individual expressions of support or criticism in daily discussions, on blogs, forums, in media (e.g. support - Klinowska 2019, Styczyński 2018, criticism – fugare 2022). Still, however, the public use of feminine forms is often enough met with a surge of criticism and insults (e.g. nn 2019). This battle of opposing opinions has prompted linguists to share their opinions on the matter both in the academic publications (e.g. Woźniak 2014, Dubisz 2021) and media (e.g. Dryjańska 2018, MASZ/PAP 2021). Even a very cautious Polish Language Council (*Rada Języka Polskiego przy Prezydium PAN*), after 7 years of silence on this topic, has felt compelled by a "heated" public discussion "confusing linguistic facts with social and ideological arguments" to issue a statement attempting to reconcile both sides (cf. RJP 2019 to RJP 2012). On the one hand it argues that "most of the arguments against derivation of female forms are baseless". On the other hand, however, it states (yet again) that there is no need for 'excessive inclusiveness' leading to redundancy (e.g. in address forms "Dear Poles-FEM and Poles-MASC") because 'generic' masculine forms (in the same exemplary address to a mixed-gender group: "Dear Poles- MASC") include all genders – a statement that has been proven wrong in multiple experimental studies (e.g. Gyga et al 2008).

As an example of the public debate, I chose to mainly concentrate on reactions on two significant events in past few years. Firstly, in fall 2019, several female parliamentary representatives postulated in the Polish parliament to include gender distinctions in official designations and documents. Secondly, the city administration of Warszawa (the Polish capital) decreed that, starting January 1, 2021, the administration could start making gender distinctions in official designations of occupations, administrative posts, address forms etc. Both caused a huge wave of often heated discussion in media, well reflecting the arguments and emotions floating around the subject of gender inclusive language in Poland, both the positive and the negative ones. As a source in these two cases, I chose freely accessible

media (newspapers, journals, daily news outlets) and personal reactions (comments to media reports, blogs) in the Internet that appeared as a direct consequence of these two events, or briefly after. Since the topic in both cases was highly politicized, I also made an effort to find reactions on all political sides, as well as those attempting to act objectively.

Let me finally remark that I recognize that gender inclusiveness means dealing with all gender identities. I, however, deliberately concentrate only on the polar opposition male vs. female. The inclusion of and neutrality towards LGBTQ+ is yet another important aspect in Polish which deserves a separate discussion.

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